SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by Joe Heaphey

When Beverly Martin, Director of Johnson County Public Library, was asked to name the most important skill for her job, she replied without hesitation, "Leadership." Beverly emphasized that a good leader creates a working environment in which all employees feel that their contributions to the organization are valued. She noted that even new and relatively inexperienced employees may nevertheless offer valuable insights and fresh ideas to library issues. Finally, she said that she always tries to pay her staff a living wage and provide funds for their continuing professional development. Although Beverly didn't attach a name to her style of leadership, her priorities suggest some of the attributes of what is known as servant-leadership. This article will explore the concept of servant-leadership and its possible application to the management of public libraries.

Servant-leadership, a term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1969, is a form of leadership that emphasizes the concept of service. Greenleaf (1904-1990), a management theorist and practicing Quaker, enjoyed a forty-year career at AT&T before retiring to found the Center for Applied Ethics, now called the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, in 1964. Greenleaf (1977), in his seminal essay *The Servant as Leader*, relates that the concept of servant-leadership came out of his reading of Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*. This story features a group of men who are making a kind of physical and spiritual journey to the east. A cheerful and helpful servant known as Leo seems to raise the spirits of everyone as he goes about his menial work. One day, however, Leo disappears. As a result, the group is thrown into disarray and is unable to complete its journey. Much later in the story, the narrator meets Leo again and discovers that the servant, Leo, was actually the leader of the Order that had sponsored the journey. Greenleaf (1977) notes that "this story clearly says that *the great leader is seen as servant first*, and that simple fact is seen as the key to his greatness" (p. 7). Greenleaf's insight into Hesse's story, together with a lifetime of work exploring how organizations, leaders, and employees interact, led him to articulate a set of principles that define the ideal servant leader. These concepts were set forth in his 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*.

Unlike many current books and essays concerning leadership, *The Servant as Leader* is less a how-to manual and more a philosophy of leadership. Rather than promoting a numbered list of steps to great leadership, as many other leadership texts do, the essay is a collection of mini-essays that touch on various concepts that Greenleaf feels are pertinent to servant-leadership. Some of these concepts are not markedly different from those that might be found in any other book on leadership. The leader must have vision and foresight, be aware of what is going on, be able to communicate, and take the initiative. Other concepts that are somewhat more unusual include Greenleaf's assertion that the servant leader must listen and try to understand, accept less-than-perfect people, withdraw occasionally to gain perspective, and seek to persuade rather than to coerce others. What makes Greenleaf's essay on leadership unique is that it goes beyond the mechanical aspects of being an effective leader and explores the ethical and moral dimensions of leadership. Most books on leadership offer one test to determine if someone is an effective leader: the bottom line. If profits are up, the leader is good. If profits are down, the leader is bad. Simple, clear-cut, and yet somehow dissatisfying. What's more, this type of leadership, in the long run, is probably bad for the company's bottom line. Perhaps this is the power of Greenleaf's essay: he doesn't mention profits. What he does mention is the well-being of the people served:

> The best test [of a servant leader], and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14)

Today, the work of developing and spreading the idea of servant-leadership is carried out by The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. Larry C. Spears (2002), the current CEO of the center, has

written a short article that lists ten characteristics of a servant-leader. Spears considers these characteristics to be critical to the development of servant-leaders:

1. Listening. Careful listening is crucial for effective communication. Listening also includes reflection – listening to one's self.

2. Empathy. Servant-leaders must empathize with others, accepting both their good and bad traits. While certain behavior may be rejected, leaders should never reject the person.

3. Healing. Acknowledging that everyone is broken in some way, Spears writes that servant-leaders should take every opportunity to heal people, to help make them whole again.

4. Awareness. General and self awareness are needed, according to Spears, to help leaders navigate ethical questions of power and values.

5. Persuasion. The servant-leader should use persuasion instead of coercion to influence the organization. Spears attributes this idea to Greenleaf's association with the Quakers.

6. Conceptualization. Servant-leaders must have a larger vision that goes beyond the day-to-day management of the organization.

7. Foresight. Foresight is the ability to use experiences of the past and present to make informed judgments about the future. Spears notes that this is a largely unexplored region of leadership studies that warrants more research.

8. Stewardship. This is the concept that all members of an organization hold that institution in trust for the good of society.

9. Commitment to the growth of people. According to Spears, this central idea of Greenleaf's writings means that servant-leaders take a sincere interest in their employees' and colleagues' professional and personal growth.

10. Building community. Greenleaf felt that our modern society had lost its sense of community and that servant-leaders should try to build communities around their institutions. Greenleaf recommended having "unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group." (Spears, 2002).

The servant-leadership concept has high ideals. But does it work? Who uses it? Is it just a pleasant-sounding philosophy with no track record in the real world? Although Greenleaf's concept of the servant-leader was based on his experience and philosophy rather than research, one study does indirectly lend support to his ideas. Leadership research at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research showed that departments led by "employee-centered" managers were more productive than those led by "production-centered" managers (Stueart & Moran, 2002, p. 353). The employee-centered manager sounds very similar to Greenleaf's servant-leader, whose main priority is to keep "people first" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 40). By placing the leader in a "servant" role, Greenleaf's model effectively creates an employee-centered workplace. Thus the University of Michigan research indirectly supports the validity of Greenleaf's model.

Nancy Ruschman (2002) addresses the real-world effectiveness of servant-leadership in her examination of three companies, Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, and Synovus Financial Corporation, that have formally accepted the principles of servant-leadership. These three companies were in Forbes' *100 Best Companies to Work for in America* in 2001. The common thread in Ruschman's analysis of these companies is community. Each company works at building internal and external communities. These companies build their internal community by treating employees well. TDIndustries, for example, pays an average of 70% of its employee health care coverage. Health care premiums are indexed to employee pay so that all employees, no matter the level of their pay, can afford health insurance. In a similar effort to help employees, Synovus offers their employees Family Education Leave, twenty hours of paid leave per year to attend special events for their children and grandchildren. The outer communities consist of various causes to which the company and its employees devote time and other resources. Southwest Airlines, for example, has an "Adopt a Pilot" program, in which pilots go to local schools to teach math, geography, and science in a fun way. These are just a few of the ways that these companies engage in community-building. The value of this effort is that it makes for happier employees and a more supportive community. These examples, along with the fact that Southwest Airlines continues today to make profits at a time when most other airlines are filing for bankruptcy, suggests that servant-leadership works ("Southwest Airlines profits nearly double"). While noting that changing an organization's management style to servant-leadership requires a great deal of courage, tenacity, and trust, Ruschman (2002) concludes that "you have nothing to lose and everything to gain" (p. 139).

While servant-leadership may work in the corporate world, is it right for public libraries? There are a number of books and articles about servant-leadership in general or in the business world, but few that address the subject as it relates to public libraries. John Doncevic, Government Documents Librarian at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, argues that in times of rapid change and distorted values, libraries need a form of leadership based on service that will embrace staff and rejuvenate the library. He writes:

> Library leadership requires different thinking not only because of the enormous change affecting libraries today, but also because of the prevalent values that work to cheapen dignity, reward competition, and produce conflict. Servant-leadership provides just the sort of countervailing thinking. (Doncevic, 2003, p. 177)

Thus he advocates servant-leadership for library administration. Doncevic notes that while the idea of servant-leadership originated with Greenleaf, his principles are often difficult to put in to practice. He also notes that recent writings such as those by James Autry have taken the basic concepts of Greenleaf and identified more specific characteristics of the servant-leader. Doncevic (2003) even suggests some specific ways that librarians can heed Autry's injunction to "be useful":

> For example, librarians should help the circulation clerk to check out the book not just when the line is long, but as a matter of course. The department head should step up and answer the reference desk telephone when the librarian is with another patron. (p. 177)

This idea is similar to the practice at Southwest Airlines of executives having to spend one day per quarter in the field doing jobs such as checking bags, loading luggage, and cleaning the planes (Ruschman, 2002).

Autry argues that servant-leadership will work for any organization because all ultimately are made up of and rely on people. But it is curious that so few public libraries apparently embrace servant-leadership. Why is this? Public libraries, existing solely to serve the public, would seem to be a perfect fit for servant-leadership and its embrace of service. One possible explanation may be that the concept has been promoted primarily for a corporate application. This emphasis on marketing the idea to corporate clients may be, if one accepts the basic premise of servant-leadership, because corporations are most in need of a leadership model that encourages ethical behavior and places an emphasis on serving employees and communities. An alternative explanation might be that corporations have more money to spend on leadership programs. Certainly a public library, even if it were interested, might have difficulties coming up with the resources for the necessary workshops and training needed to transform a traditional management model to one employing the principles of servant-leadership. Autry (2001) points out that we are conditioned our entire lives to accept hierarchies and give unquestioning obedience to authority. Changing this conditioning, he suggests, will take a great deal of preparation, education and training. He adds:

> You can make reading lists, but that alone won't do it because, sad to say, most people will not read books. Better to bring in speakers and discussion leaders, show videos, and provide opportunities for response and participation by everyone (Autry, 2001, p. 54).

This initial input of extra resources, though perhaps advantageous in the long run, may be beyond the budgets of many cash-strapped public libraries.

Another reason may be the connection between this leadership model and Christianity which may make some public library leaders uncomfortable – particularly if they have just been defending intellectual freedom from the onslaught of various groups of conservative, evangelical Christians. Some people in the community may feel uncomfortable if their library adopted this leadership model – either because of its use of the word servant or its philosophical ties to Christianity.

In spite of these issues, the servant-leadership model has the potential to offer a great deal to public libraries, the staff within them, and the communities around them. What are some concrete ways that public libraries might adopt this model? Examples that fit into the concept of servant-leadership can be drawn from sources that don't necessarily use the term "servant-leadership." There are many good ideas that one could use to help implement servant-leadership in Cihak and Howland's (2002) *Leadership Roles for Librarians*. The book explores various aspects of leadership – e.g., the leader as builder, the leader as champion, the leader as coach, the leader as innovator, etc. – from the perspectives of librarians. For example, Robert C. Bering, Law Librarian at the University of Californian at Berkeley Law School, addresses the issue of listening:

> Leadership is not racing out ahead of everyone; it is reaching down inside an organization. It is taking time to listen to staff… The best innovations come from the front line of library activity, not from a formula. (Bering, 2002, p. 78)

Bering states that each summer he meets with each staff member for a half hour so that he can listen to them. This sounds like an obvious step in the right direction toward servant-leadership, but one would hope that a servant-leader would attempt to listen to staff members more than once a year. This might be accomplished by adopting the example of Southwest Airlines executives and spending one day each quarter at the circulation desk or at the reference desk with regular staff. This would not only allow the library director to see firsthand the challenges in these areas, but also help to forge bonds with staff that would make effective communication more likely.

Carole McConnell (2004) describes how the Broward County Library (Florida) is addressing the shortage of professional librarians by "growing their own." Their program, the Graduate Intern Program, allows support staff to receive on-the-job-training while receiving financial assistance to earn their MLS. Graduate interns are allowed five years to complete the program. Upon graduation, they are eligible for a librarian position. In addition to this, leadership training is provided by the Broward County Library Leadership Institute. These programs illustrate well the servant-leader's commitment to the growth of people.

These examples show that library leaders are already following some of the principles of servant-leadership without identifying it as such. A conscious effort by public libraries to adopt the servant-leadership model (or at least its principles), however, might help to lend some institutional stability and focus to the above examples. The book *Leadership Roles for Librarians* (Cihak & Howland, 2002) contains fourteen possible leadership roles including the somewhat redundant "The Leader as Leader." Unfortunately, the leader as servant is not among these roles. This may be due, as suggested before, to the negative connotations of the word servant. But is not service at the very core of what public libraries do? The principles of servant-leadership remind us that public libraries exist to serve the public. To paraphrase Greenleaf's test of the servant-leader, does the public library help people to become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous? Does it benefit, or at least not deprive the least privileged in society? Our society desperately needs the answers to these questions to be yes. Servant-leadership's application to public libraries should make this possible.

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